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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000179

SIPDIS

PRETORIA, MAPUTO PASS A/S CONSTANCE NEWMAN

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/S, INR/AA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KCOR](#) [PHUM](#) [KMCA](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: UDF OFFICIALS CRY FOUL, DEFEND PARTY

REF: A) LILONGWE 15 B) LILONGWE 152 (notal)

¶11. SUMMARY. In a February 17 meeting with the donor community, four United Democratic Front (UDF) officials lashed out bitterly against President Mutharika. The officials outlined the political hazards of Mutharika's new party, professed support for his anti-corruption efforts, and denied that there was ever a plot to assassinate the president. END SUMMARY.

¶12. On February 17, representatives from the donor community gathered at the British High Commission at the request of senior members of the United Democratic Front (UDF) National Executive Committee (NEC). Speaking on behalf of the party were George Mtafu, NEC member and Parliamentarian, Friday Jumbe, NEC member and Parliamentarian (recently indicted on corruption charges related to his involvement in the 2000 maize scandal), Sam Mpasu, NEC member, and Brown Mpingajira, former opposition party presidential candidate who has since re-joined the UDF. The group, speaking from prepared points in an obviously well-rehearsed presentation, began the discussion by observing that the president's departure from the UDF is a "strange turn of events" and that the UDF wants the donors to know the whole story.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH MUTHARIKA

¶13. According to the group, Mutharika is guilty of some of the same corrupt acts for which he has vilified his erstwhile party. They accused the president of using political loyalty as a means to escape corruption investigations, and cited a recent court case of a previous UDF official who had been charged with tax evasion, only to have his charges mysteriously dropped when he allied with the president. Claiming that officials who have sided with the President are merely political opportunists seeking immunity from investigation, they described an environment of fear and intimidation within the government. They also cited the president's direct control over parliamentary budgets, which effectively weakens the legislative branch against the executive, as a method the President is using to wield political influence. The Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), they said, is subject to the whims of the president and thus cannot act independently. They accused the president of using public resources in activities related to the formation of his new party - a particularly common aspect of UDF leadership.

WHO'S MORE CORRPT?

¶14. Mtafu attacked the president's methodology of purging corruption, and questioned the president's motivation. He noted that Mutharika was out of the country during the democratic transition in 1994 and the subsequent establishment of government accountability agencies such as the Anti-Corruption Bureau, the Ombudsman, and the Law Commission. Mtafu accused the president of "hijacking" these organizations to further his own political agenda. He added that the president's actions are "as if the UDF is the only corrupt party here-- the UDF is corrupt but so are the rest."

¶15. Noting that it was the UDF that "made sure the president was elected", Mpasu professed party support for the president's anti-corruption initiatives and categorically denied that UDF had tried to thwart Mutharika's agenda. Rather, he said, it was the president who refused to cooperate with the party. Several times during the meeting the officials referred to the UDF's actions to "make sure" Mutharika was elected in the May 2004 elections. When asked directly, the four did not deny that there had been vote tampering, and Mpingajira went so far as to say that "something sinister" had gone on. "If there was rigging," he said, "none of us at this table knew about it" and "it was done by a small group within the UDF."

NO ASSASSINATION PLOT

¶16. Mpingajira carefully described the events surrounding

the alleged assassination plot on the president (ref A). He said such allegations were absurd and unrealistic, and cited the fact that one of the three who were arrested and later released remains a presidentially-appointed deputy minister. The group vehemently denied any current or previous attempt to "eliminate" Mutharika.

COMMENT: PLENTY OF SOUR GRAPES, BUT WORDS OF CAUTION

¶7. With few Malawians listening to the cries of this dying party, it seems the UDF decided in desperation to try their message on the diplomats. The party appears to have forgotten that it was the UDF that set the precedent over the last ten years for the very behaviors of which they are accusing Mutharika. In spite of the obvious sour-grapes rhetoric, the group raised some valid points about the traps Mutharika must avoid. To properly implement his anti-corruption campaign, Mutharika will have to ensure he does not confuse political loyalty with immunity, and he must adhere to legal procedures and processes. His economic policies will need to be transparent and non-partisan, and he will have to allow parliament and the ACB freedom to operate as independently as possible. The UDF's complaints do not necessarily indicate legitimate failings in any of these areas, but represent some of the pot-holes in Mutharika's road to political success.

GILMOUR